Course Overview

This course examines class inequality in American society. It not only describes how the rich, the poor, and the middle classes live, but also how they relate to one another. Topics include the strategies used by the rich for maintaining the status quo, the hopes cherished by the middle class for improving their position, and the obstacles that keep the poor in their place. Readings will emphasize the dynamics of inequality as they intersect with class, race, and gender. This course emphasizes that inequality does not “just happen”, but rather is a result of the way our society is structured.

As a core course in sociology this course will meet the following goals:

a) Help students to ask, and answer "perennial questions"
b) Incorporate cultural diversity
c) Present a historical view of the subject
d) Demonstrate the methodology of the discipline
e) Include a substantial writing component
f) Challenge students to create a personal philosophy

In this course we will study class inequality in modern American society. Because Inequality in America is a core course, we will consider the perennial questions of social justice and fairness that American citizens face. On the one hand, Americans strongly endorse an egalitarian rhetoric based on meritocracy. On the other, inequalities of class, race, and gender are significant dimensions of our society. In this course students will be expected to develop a personal analysis and philosophy for thinking about and responding to persistent forms of inequality. The intellectual framework for this course stresses the consequences of class inequality - that is, the inequality that arises from the fact that some (few) people privately own the productive forces of our society (factories, businesses, media, etc.) while most others must sell their labor in order to survive. Within a class framework, the roles of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender will also be considered - giving rise to an analysis that emphasizes the culturally diverse ways inequality is experienced and resisted.

To fully address inequality through these readings, we will have to consider not only what sociologists know, but also how they go about doing research - i.e. we will raise the methodological question: How do we know what we know? The readings in this course use a variety of research methods to show how the lives of the rich and the poor intertwine and shape each other.

We will begin the course with an overview of social stratification and a historical analysis of rising inequality in America (Categorically Unequal). Following these readings, we will turn our attention to each economic class in our society: the owners and highly paid professionals, entrepreneurs, and managerial employees (Richistan), middle-class white-collar employees
Inequality in America (Fall, 2012)

(Keeping Up), the working poor (Families on the Fault Line), and the impoverished (One Nation, Underprivileged). These readings constitute a systematic comparison of various classes in American society. They also demonstrate a variety of research strategies (surveys, participant observation, interviewing, etc.) that have been particularly fruitful throughout the field of sociology.

The questions to be asked about the owners are: Who are they? What percent of the population falls in this group? How do they maintain their privileged positions? About the middle class: In what direction does their future lie? Are they becoming more like owners or more like workers? Can they maintain themselves indefinitely as a privileged stratum between owners and other workers? About workers we will ask: How do they see their own experiences? What are the achievements and discontents of their lives? Why do they accept less than their fair share of America's great wealth? How do they try to improve their situation? Finally, we will want to find out whether the unemployed live in a distinctive "culture of poverty" that keeps them from participating on equal terms in society or whether some other explanation is possible for the persistence of poverty.

Following these readings, we will conclude the course with a novel (The Tortilla Curtain) that synthesizes many of the topics and themes addressed throughout the course. This novel deals with issues of class, gender, ethnicity, as well as another source of inequality in our society: citizenship status.

Assignments & Expectations:

As a student in this course you are expected to attend classes regularly, be engaged, and actively participate in class. This course is designed to be discussion based, and needs your participation to be most effective. Discussions and/or lectures are essential to building understanding and will be considered required and important course materials (in other words, take good notes!). Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material for the day and make connections between the readings and any additional materials presented in class. I will take note of the frequency of your participation as well as excessive absences and lateness, as this has an effect on group discussion. Students who are disruptive (which includes poor classroom behavior, arriving late, leaving early, and leaving class regularly) will find their final grade lowered at least a half grade.

Every student should be prepared with something to “say” about the topic for each class. This could be a question, a passage you appreciated, something you found confusing, or a comment related to the material. I understand that students have many different learning styles and there are many ways to demonstrate participation. In addition to in-class participation, participation points can be earned through small group discussions, or outside of class by visiting me during office hours, e-mailing questions or additional thoughts after the discussion, or sharing current events. We will begin each class with an opportunity to discuss current events that relate to Inequality in the United States. These current events can also be emailed to me before class for me to share. Each student is required to share at least two current event topics over the course of the semester as part of your class participation grade. In addition to a brief explanation of the current event, you should be prepared to explain why this story relates to inequality in the United States generally, or a discussion/reading from the course more specifically.
Every student will also be required to sign up, as part of a pair or group, to lead the discussion for one class during the semester. This will also be considered as part of your class participation grade.

A schedule of assignment dates is included below. Please note that, with ten short essays and two longer papers, this is a writing intensive course. Assignments for these papers will be distributed separately, as the course proceeds. Your final grade will be computed as follows:

- 10 short essays (@ 4% each) = 40%
- Class Participation (including current events and class discussion) = 25%
- Mid-term Paper = 15%
- Final Paper = 20%

Any work that is not turned in on time will be penalized two points for each day past the due date it is received. Assignments will be considered late if received after the start of class on the due date. As noted below, short essays will not be accepted late. Incompletes or extensions will only be granted for emergencies or under special circumstances. You must notify me before an assignment is due if you wish to ask for an extension.

**Short Response Essays:** There will be ten short response essays assigned throughout the semester (due dates included on the schedule below). These papers provide an opportunity to address and respond to the assigned readings, as well as integrate your own personal experiences. These essays should be roughly 2 pages (double-spaced), and should respond to a specific prompt designed to allow students to interact with the assigned readings. The prompt will be assigned at least one class session before the essay is due. Since we will be discussing these papers on the days they are due, short response essays will not be accepted late. Essays that fully address the questions posed, as well as integrate course material, will receive a full credit (4 points). Essays that fail to meet these requirements will receive either half (2 points) or no credit.

Additional information on other assignments (Midterm and Final Papers) will be provided as the semester proceeds.

**A note on personal electronics and class participation:** Since this class is heavily based on participation and discussion, I request that students refrain from using laptops and other personal electronic devices (computer, iPad, iPhone, etc.) during the class period. I find that such devices tend to be more of a distraction than a learning aid. Any Powerpoints used as lecture slides will be posted on Blackboard after the class for your convenience. If you have any questions or concerns about this request, please let me know.

**Extra Credit:**
If it is brought to my attention that there is a local event on or off campus that directly relates to issues of Inequality in America, students can receive 2 extra credit percentage points. Students must (1) attend the event, (2) discuss it in class, and (3) write a one page summary and reflection on the event. A maximum of 3 such events may be used toward extra credit for a total of 6 extra credit percentage points toward the final grade. Students must meet all 3 of the components of
the task to receive full credit. Students who do not personally attend the event will not receive any extra credit.

Any events to be considered for extra credit must be brought to my attention at least one week in advance of the event in order to review and approve the event and announce the opportunity to the entire class.

**Assignment Due Dates:**
- Essay #1 – Thursday, September 13th
- Essay #2 – Tuesday, September 25th
- Essay #3 – Thursday, October 4th
- Essay #4 – Tuesday, October 16th
- **Midterm Paper** – Tuesday, October 23rd
- Essay #5 – Tuesday, October 30th
- Essay #6 – Tuesday, November 6th
- Essay #7 – Tuesday, November 13th
- Essay #8 – Tuesday, November 20th
- Essay #9 – Thursday, November 29th
- Essay #10 – Thursday, December 6th
- **Final Paper** – Monday, December 17th

**Academic Integrity:**
Academic integrity is a standard of utmost importance in this class. Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the Boston College website at:

www.bc.edu/integrity

If you have any questions pertaining to the academic integrity guidelines, please come and speak with me. If you are caught violating Boston College’s policies on academic integrity, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment and the appropriate Dean will be notified in accordance to the rules set forth by Boston College.

**Course Readings:**
Books to Purchase (also available on reserve in the library):
- *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey
- *Richistan* – Robert Frank
- *Falling Behind* – Robert H. Frank
- *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian B. Rubin
- *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

Additional Readings Available Online in the “Reading/Resources” Folder on the Course Blackboard Website (Indicated by an asterisk)*
Course Calendar and Schedule:

Section 1 - Overview of Social Stratification in America

September 4th:
Introductions, Syllabus, Assignments, etc.

September 6th:
“Inequality by Design” – Claude S. Fischer, Michael Hout, Martin Sanchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss *
“America’s 1 Percent Problem”, Chapter 1 of The Price of Inequality – Joseph E. Stiglitz*

September 11th:
“How Stratification Works”, Chapter 1 of Categorically Unequal - Douglas S. Massey

September 13th:
Essay #1 Due
“The Rise and Fall of Egalitarian Capitalism”, Chapter 2 of Categorically Unequal – Douglas S. Massey

Section 2 - The Power Elite: Life at the Top

September 18th:
“The Power Elite” – C. Wright Mills*
“I’d Rather Be Rich” – Lisa Keister *

September 20th:
Film: “People Like Us”

September 25th:
Essay #2 Due
“Making It”, “Living It” and “Losing It”, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Richistan – Robert Frank

September 27th:

October 2nd:
Section 3 - The Middle Class: Keeping Up?

October 4th:
Essay #3 Due

October 9th:
“Introduction”, “Recent Changes in Income and Wealth Inequality”, “Inequality, Happiness, and Health”, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Falling Behind – Robert H. Frank

October 11th:
“Envy or Context”, “The Rising Cost of Adequate”, and “Why Do We Care about Rank”, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Falling Behind – Robert H. Frank

October 16th:
Essay #4 Due:
“What Types of Consumption Are Most Sensitive to Context”, “How Can Middle-Class Families Afford to Keep Up?” and “Smart for One, Dumb for All”, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of Falling Behind – Robert H. Frank

October 18th:

October 23rd:
Midterm Paper Due
Film: “Scenes from a Class Struggle in Springfield” (in class)

Section 4 - The Working Class: Life on the Edge

October 25th:
“Reworking the Color Line”, Chapter 3 of Categorically Unequal – Douglas S. Massey

October 30th:
Essay #5 Due
“Introduction”, “The Invisible Americans”, and “People Don’t Know Right From Wrong Anymore!”, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Families On the Fault Line – Lillian Rubin

November 1st:
“Mother Goes to Work” and “The Transformation of Family Life”, Chapters 4 and 5 of Families on the Fault Line - Lillian Rubin

November 6th:
Essay #6 Due
“When You Get Laid Off, It’s Like You Lose a Part of Yourself!” and “Shattered
November 8th:
“Past History/Present Reality” and “Is This a White Country, or What?”, Chapter 8 and 9 of *Families on the Fault Line* - Lillian Rubin

November 13th:
*Essay #7 Due*
“This Country Don’t Owe Nobody Nothing!” and “Families on the Fault Line”, Chapters 10 and 11 of *Families on the Fault Line* – Lillian Rubin

November 15th:
“Engendering Inequality”, Chapter 6 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

**Section 5 - The Poor: Poverty as a Structural Failing**

November 20th:
“Remaking the Political Economy”, Chapter 5 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

November 22nd:
*No Class – Thanksgiving Break*

November 27th:
“Below the Line” and “Poverty as a Structural Failing”, Chapters 2 and 3 of *One Nation, Underprivileged* – Mark Robert Rank*

November 29th:
*Essay #9 Due*
“Building a Better Underclass”, Chapter 4 of *Categorically Unequal* – Douglas S. Massey

**Section 6 - Conclusions: Bringing it all Together**

December 4th:
Pages 1-194 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

December 8th:
Pages 195-355 in *The Tortilla Curtain* – T.C. Boyle

Monday, December 17th:
*Final Paper Due*